

PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS BEFORE NEWMAN'S CONVERSION

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OCTOBER 9, 1945, marked the centenary of the conversion of John Henry Cardinal Newman. The remembrance of that great event occasioned a convention in England and many editorials and articles of recognition and appreciation throughout the world. It might also remind us, especially those of us who are interested in practical apologetics, that the letters which Newman wrote during the six years preceding his conversion still offer us the most amazing example in English of the tortuous psychological process that is possible before one enters the Catholic Church.

For us who discuss the competence of the human intellect in regard to religious truth, and who view the question of conversion in the abstract, it may be well to look again and again at the concrete story of Newman as history has left it for us. The evidence he gives in his letters has the distinct advantage of being a record written, not while he was aglow with a recently acquired Catholicism, but while he was still in the process of conversion. The letters do not contain later reflexions on the steps that he took; they record the feelings and reactions that went *pari passu* with each move that he made. They show the brilliance and the blindness, the effort and the heartbreak of six years until the night when he wrote to his sister: "I must tell you what will pain you greatly, but will make it as short as you would wish me to do. This night Father Dominic, the Passionist, sleeps here. He does not know of my intention, but I shall ask him to receive me into what I believe to be the one Fold of the Redeemer."¹

A review of those six years may be used as a startling paradigm of the intricate maze of difficulties that can be the ingredients of the conversion even of an intellectual giant. It shows the keenness of the human intellect and also its blind spots, the claims of Catholicism on reason and the flight of reason from those claims, the urge toward truth and the strength of prejudice in rejecting truth. We know that a

¹ *Letters and Correspondence of John Henry Newman*, edited by Anne Mozley, (London, 1890), II, 418.

man can deliberately turn his mind from the Church. Newman did just that, but strangely enough, he felt that he was acting on principle. A man can blind himself to the truth and know it. Newman blinded himself and thought it the right thing to do. A man usually seeks for a reason to justify his actions. Newman, in all sincerity, sought for reasons; but some of them sound rather puerile to our ears today.

No one doubts the intellectual brilliance of Newman. Yet, at times, he is the perfect example of the saying, "hearing you will hear, but not understand; and seeing you will see, and not perceive."² The sincerity and the sanctity of the man are apparent on every page he ever wrote. Yet that sincerity and sanctity go hand and hand with what looks almost like a deliberate rejection of light, even at the very moment when he is begging God to give him light. He studied and fasted and prayed, and yet when faced with facts that should have convinced him, he reacted against the conviction as one would to a temptation. He saw the Catholic Church as a "signum levatum in nationes,"³ yet it was a sign which he contradicted, and when in conscience he could do that no more, he was in constant fear and doubt that what he saw so clearly might be just an illusion and a dream. All this we may read in his letters and, as we read, we cannot forget that the man who writes them is sincere, saintly, and intellectually gifted by God in a special way.

Doubt has been cast on the accuracy of Newman's own description of his conversion in the *Apologia*. Instead of being in the intellectual order, the conversion has been styled a *ressentiment*, an act of retaliation in which Newman disowned the Church which had first disowned him.⁴ De Sanctis calls it a love story,⁵ and Bremond, who thought "nearly all the books written on him swarm with misunderstandings,"⁶ calls the history of the conversion "the long distress of a seeker after signs."⁷ "The discussions of the intelligence, the sympathies of the heart count for nothing in a matter in which salvation is concerned."⁸

Such statements give us all the more incentive to look again at what Newman himself has to say of the process while he is actually experiencing it.

² Matt. 13:14.

³ *DB*, 1794.

⁴ F. Cross, *John Henry Newman* (Philip Allan, 1933), pp. 142-43.

⁵ S. de Sanctis, *Religious Conversion* (New York, 1927), p. 110.

⁶ H. Bremond, *The Mystery of Newman*, translated by H. Corrance (London, 1907), p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

THE LETTERS

Newman himself, to my mind, gives us a key to the solution of his difficulties when he writes in 1845, while still outside the Church: "If intellect were to settle the matter, I should not be now where I am. But other considerations come in, and distress me."⁹ Even as early as 1839 he had sufficient proof for the intellect; for it was then that he realized that he was in "loco hereticorum."¹⁰ That realization, however, was not enough. Truth, to be effective, must do more than convince the intellect; it has to exhibit some real attraction for the will. And, in the case of Newman, there was absolutely no attraction for the will in the proposition which he faced.

When Newman faced that proposition, he was weighed down under the burden of deep seated prejudice, a real dislike for Rome, a childlike confidence in Anglican teachers, and a tender love for the Church he had tried to defend. It was against all this that his intellectual conviction had to struggle.

The first blow hit him at a time when he was supremely confident of his position as a controversialist in the Anglican Church.¹¹ He had begun to read the Monophysite controversy during the summer, and the reading had disturbed his peace of mind. Then, in August, a friend called his attention to Dr. Wiseman's article in the *Dublin Review*, particularly to the phrase in it: "Securus judicat orbis terrarum."¹² How great an impression this made on him is apparent from the number of places in his correspondence where he mentions it: to Keble, to Coleridge, to a friend, in a fragment, to Manning,¹³ to Mozley,¹⁴ and to others. The letter closest to the event is written to F. Rogers on September 22, 1839:

Since I wrote to you, I have had the first real hit from Romanism which has happened to me. R. W., who has been passing through, directed my attention to Dr. Wiseman's article in the new *Dublin*. I must confess it has given me a stomach-ache. You see the whole history of the Monophysites has been a sort of alternative. And now comes this dose at the end of it. It does certainly come

⁹ W. Ward, *The Life of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (London, 1927), I, 81 (letter to Wilberforce, April 27, 1845).

¹⁰ *Correspondence of John Henry Newman with John Keble and Others, 1839-1845*, edited at the Birmingham Oratory (London, 1917), p. 20 (letter to a friend, October 30, 1844).

¹¹ *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London, 1900), p. 93.

¹² *Correspondence*, pp. 1-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 316, 345, 20, 18, 276.

¹⁴ *Letters*, II, 384.

upon one that we are not at the bottom of things. At this moment we have sprung a leak; and the worst of it is that those sharp fellows, Ward, Stanley, and Co., will not let one go to sleep on it. . . .

It is no laughing matter. I will not blink the question, so be it; but you don't suppose that I am a madcap to take up notions suddenly—only there is an uncomfortable vista opened which was closed before.¹⁵

He admitted to Keble later that an attentive consideration of the Donatist heresy had made him "quite excited." "It broke in upon me that we were in a state of schism."¹⁶ During this excitement he took Wilberforce into his confidence. "His companion expressed the hope that Newman might die before taking such a step. He replied that he had thought, if ever the time should come when he was in serious danger, of asking his friends to pray that if it was not indeed the will of God, he might be taken away."¹⁷

In a fragment written in October, 1844, he describes his reaction to the realization that broke in on him that he was "in loco hereticorum":

I did not dare to trust my impression and resisted it. I trust I did so on principle; certainly I have long thought it a duty to resist such impressions—if true they will return (St. Theresa). I collected myself and wrote a paper against the article in the *Dublin Review*. This paper quieted me for two years, till the autumn of 1841.¹⁸

There are some important truths in this bit of self-revelation. First, although faced with the truth, Newman's almost instinctive reaction was to reject it because it was so directly opposed to all that he had known and loved. This he does in all sincerity, basing his action on principle—a fact that we might easily disregard if we were to consider truth and its acceptance or rejection merely in the abstract. Secondly, it is clear that, at this particular stage of his career, an individual intellectual conviction was not enough to move Newman. Wiseman's article might be sufficient for the intellect, but it fell far short of contending successfully with the weight of prejudice, emotion, and sentiment, and, in general, with Newman's attachment for what he was later to call the "dying or dead system in which we have lived all our days."¹⁹

The article did, however, open an agonizing conflict between the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

¹⁶ *Correspondence*, p. 219.

¹⁷ *Letters*, II, 257.

¹⁸ *Correspondence*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

intellect that could not resist truth and the will that did not want it. Moreover, it left Newman, as he was later to describe himself, a pure Protestant. He had nothing positive except a strong desire to "speak sharply against what I considered the practical corruptions of the Church of Rome."²⁰

In 1841, three blows broke him, as he tells us in the *Apologia*:

I had got but a little way in my work [the translation of St. Athanasius], when my trouble returned on me. The ghost had come a second time. In the Arian history I found the very same phenomenon, in a far bolder shape, which I found in the Monophysite. . . . I saw clearly, that in the history of Arianism, the pure Arians were the Protestants, the semi-Arians were the Anglicans, and that Rome now was what it was then.²¹

Added to this second vivid impression on his intellect were the two practical difficulties with the Anglicans—the charges of the Bishops and the Jerusalem Bishopric, "inflicting on my imagination what my reason had been unable to withstand some years before that."²² Yet, despite this impression on intellect and imagination, there is no indication that he unburdened his soul to anyone, as he had two years before when faced with the Donatist controversy. Nor is there any indication that the impression led him any nearer to Rome. As a matter of fact the contrary seems to be true. He writes to Hope in October, 1841:

Your account of the Jerusalem matter is fearful—the more I think of it the more I am dismayed. On me it falls very hard—here I am laboring with all my might to keep men from Rome, and as if I had not enough trouble, a new element of separation is introduced. . . . If people are driving me quite against my feeling out of the Church of England, they shall know that they are doing so.²³

Were we to consider merely the intellect of the man we would certainly think such a reaction strange. For him Rome is right, and Anglicanism is heresy; yet he is "laboring with all his might to keep men from Rome." The only reason for such zeal is the principle which he had adopted of resisting unwelcome intellectual convictions as merely temptations. On that principle he felt that he personally

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²² *Correspondence*, p. 327.

²¹ *Apologia*, p. 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

should not leave his Church and, for the same reason, should hold all others back with him.

Such action, sincere though it was, took its toll of Newman. Perhaps some indication of the disturbance in his soul may be found in a complaint he makes to an unknown correspondent in 1843: "People cannot understand a state of doubt, of misgiving, of being unequal to responsibilities, etc., but they conclude either that you have a clear view one way or the other."²⁴ His view, at the time, was certainly not clear; it could not be clear under the circumstances. He gives an analysis of himself to Keble in 1843:

I have enough consciousness in me of insincerity and double dealing which I know you abhor, to doubt about the correctness of what I shall tell you about myself. I really cannot say whether I am stating my existing feelings, motives and view fairly, and whether my memory will play me false. I cannot hope but I shall seem inconsistent to you—and whether I am or have been I cannot say. I will but observe that it is very difficult to realise one's own views in certain cases, at the time of acting, which is implied in culpable inconsistency; and difficult again when conscious of them to discriminate between passing thought and permanent impressions, particularly when they are unwelcome.²⁵

Such vagueness, uneasiness, doubt, and difficulty were the natural consequences of the constant internal battle between the intellect and the will. Regardless of how much the intellect was impressed by the reading of the Monophysite and Donatist heresy, the will could still make Newman wonder whether this was just a "passing thought or a permanent impression." So strongly did the will cling to its former position that he could write in 1841: "I am in full dismay lest a secession to the Church of Rome is in full prospect (years hence perhaps) on the part of men who are least suspected."²⁶

In December of the same year we find him solicitous for a friend:

R. W. makes me think that your mind is getting unsettled on the subject of Rome. I think you will give me enough credit, carissime, of not undervaluing the feeling that draws one that way—and yet I am (I trust) quite clear about my duty to remain where I am. . . . I am content to be Moses in the desert—or with Elijah excommunicated from the Temple.²⁷

For a full appreciation of this last statement we must read his sermon on "Elijah the Prophet of the Latter Days," which he delivered in the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

same month. It is a pitiable sermon with its admission that Newman was "cut off from the great body of the Church,"²⁸ and with its exhortation to "think it enough, with the Prophets of old, to be patient, to pray, and to wait."²⁹

This resolution to remain where he was, "with Elijah excommunicated from the Temple," had to have some justification. We find that justification in a letter to Dr. Jelf:

As to the present authoritative teaching of Rome, to judge by what we see in Public, I think it goes very far indeed to substitute another Gospel for the true one. Instead of setting before the soul the Holy Trinity and hell and heaven; it does seem to me as a popular system, to preach the Blessed Virgin and the Saints, and Purgatory. If ever there was a system which required reformation, it is that of Rome at this day.³⁰

While we realize that Newman was tremendously capable intellectually and honestly searching for the truth, we have to note here that this justification for remaining where he was is prejudice pure and simple. He himself later admitted that his viewpoint was based simply on ignorance.³¹ While his desire for the truth would take him to Littlemore to seclusion and penance and prayer, even to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, it would not take him to the study of the doctrines of Catholicism to verify the statements he makes about the position of the Roman Church. He is content "to judge by what we see in Public." As he was to write to a friend in 1844:

I hardly ever, even abroad, was at their services. I was scarcely for an hour in the same room with a Roman Catholic in my life. I have had no correspondence with anyone. I know absolutely nothing of them except that external aspect that is so uninviting. In the *Tablet* and *Dublin Review*, in radical combinations and liberal meetings, this is how I know them.³²

On such knowledge Newman could condemn Rome and feel justified in remaining where he was and in attempting to keep all others with him.

At the beginning of 1843 we note a change in his position. Not that he was beginning to love Rome more, but rather that he felt he could attack its position less. He had been uncomfortably conscious all

²⁸ *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* (London, 1909), 371.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

³¹ *Apologia*, p. 195.

³⁰ *Correspondence*, pp. 166-67.

³² *Correspondence*, p. 345.

along that whatever influence he had exerted on men had been in the direction of Rome. "There was a time when I tried to balance this by strong statements against Rome, which I suppose to a certain extent effected my object. But now, when I feel I can do this no more, how greatly is the embarrassment of my position increased."³³

What was it that brought about this change in his position? Was it the few books he had received from Dr. Russell that gave him the true Catholic doctrine on some of the points that he had misunderstood? Was it the result of prayer and meditation at Littlemore? Whatever it was, he quietly retracted the strongest of his charges against Catholicism in a letter to the *Conservative Journal*. Concerning that letter he writes an honest and humble note to Hope: "My conscience goaded me some two months since to an act which comes into effect, I believe, in the *Conservative Journal* next Saturday—viz. to eat a few dirty words of mine."³⁴

Finally in May 1843, we find the beginning of the capitulation. He writes to Keble:

The most kind tone of your letter has strongly urged me to tell you something which has at last been forced upon my full consciousness.

There is something about myself which is no longer a secret to me—and if not to me, surely it ought not to be so to someone else; and I think the other person should be you, whose advice I always wished to follow.

We might interrupt the letter here to note that "what has at last been forced upon his full consciousness" is by no means something clear and definite. Nor is it a thought that brings peace, or security, or any sense of finality. Newman's honest effort at self-analysis merely brings him face to face with the same stumbling block that had been perpetually halting his progress for the past four years.

Some thoughts are like hideous dreams, and we wake from them, and think they will never return; and though they do return, we cannot be sure still that they are more than vague fancies; and till one is so sure that they are not, as to be afraid of concealing within what is at variance with one's professions, one does not like, or rather it is wrong to mention them to another.³⁵

This revelation to a friend gives us as clear an insight into the working and confusion and unsettlement and sincerity and honesty of

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 210–11.

³⁴ *Letters*, II, 363.

³⁵ *Correspondence*, p. 218.

the mind of Newman during these six years as we can find anywhere. It has at last been forced upon his full consciousness, but the impression that has been lodged there has all the horror of a "hideous dream." In a subsequent letter he tells Keble what the "hideous dream" actually is. It is "to begin to suspect oneself external to the Catholic Church, having publicly, earnestly, frequently, insisted on the ordinary necessity of being in it."³⁶

In a separate paper, inclosed in the letter, is a short history of Newman's position from 1839 to 1843. He tells of the reading of the Monophysite and Donatist controversy; then, he says:

It broke in upon me that we were in a state of schism. . . . To conquer this feeling I wrote my article on the Catholicity of the English Church, as I have written other things since. For a while my mind was quieted. . . . At present, I fear, as far as I can realise my own conviction, I consider the Roman Catholic Communion the Church of the Apostles, and what grace is among us (which, through God's mercy, is not little) is extraordinary, and the overflowings of His Dispensation.³⁷

We might think that after this open profession, not only that his Church was in schism but also that the Roman Catholic Communion was the Church of the Apostles, the troubles of Newman would cease and that he would seek entrance into the Catholic Church. Yet we find him telling Keble in August that one reason for publishing his volume *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* was that it "would be a sort of guarantee to people that my resigning St. Mary's (to which I am more and more strongly drawn) did not involve an ulterior step—for no one could suppose that I should be publishing to-day, and leaving the Church tomorrow."³⁸ And, a few days later, his real attitude is manifest in another letter: "I have just had a letter from Lockhart, one of my inmates, who has been away for three weeks, saying that he is on the point of joining the Church of Rome and is in retreat under Dr. Gentili. . . . You may fancy how sick this makes me."³⁹

As usual, his determination not to move finds some sort of justification. This time it is an appeal to the "ordinary way of Providence," which acts "both as a precept and a mercy, that men should not make great changes by themselves, or on private judgment, but should

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

change with the body in which they find themselves, or at least in company."⁴⁰ Newman makes a good deal of that reason at this particular time. Even in the following January when he is still debating whether to publish his *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*, he tells Keble that he wants to make the action of the crowd his norm for action. He wishes to go "not by my own judgment, but by something external, like the pillar of cloud in the desert. Such is the united movement of many." As for the volume of sermons, "if it were permanently to stop people, this would have a great influence on me. I should think there was something real in them. What I fear is that they are only ingenious."⁴¹

There are four sermons in this volume which, more than the others, might stop people from going to Rome. And it is the same four sermons that give Newman his scruples about publishing. They are entitled "Invisible Presence of Christ," "Outward and Inward Notes of the Church," "Grounds for Steadfastness in our Religious Profession," and "Elijah the Prophet of the Latter Days." They have for their general subject matter the "safety of continuance in our own communion."⁴² He says of them: "the only objection to publishing, I suppose, would be from fear of being or seeming insincere."⁴³ He develops that idea in a letter to Keble:

I felt the argument of the Four Sermons when I wrote them—I feel it now (tho' not so strongly, I suppose)—I think it is mainly (whether correctly analysed in them and drawn out, or not) what reconciles me to our position. But I don't feel confident, judging of myself by former changes, that I shall think it a good argument five years hence. Now, is it fair, I think it is, to put forward the argument under the circumstances? I think it *is* fair to stop people in a headlong movement, (if it be possible)—to give them time to think—to give the English cause the advantage of this argument—and to see what comes of it, as to myself, so to others. A man only said to me to-day, 'You have not an idea of the effect of those Sermons when you preach them.' However, you shall judge whether it is trifling with so solemn a thing as truth.⁴⁴

Finally, it was decided to publish the sermons but with a note attached that "the four following sermons, on the safety of continuance in our communion, are not addressed, (1) either to those who happily

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁴² *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*, p. 308.

⁴³ *Correspondence*, p. 248.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

are without doubts on the subject, (2) or to those who have no right to be in doubt about it."⁴⁶

While he is waiting for the action of the group to determine his manner of action, and hoping that these sermons, which he fears are only ingenious, might influence the group, he gives an interesting bit of advice to an unknown correspondent in regard to joining the Church of Rome. He mentions the case of one who went to Rome and then returned to his own sect as a warning that should be taken against sudden moves. He writes: "Our Lord tells us to count the cost, how can you tell whether it is His voice, or that of a deceiving spirit. It is a rule in spiritual matters to reject a suggestion at first to anything extraordinary, from the certainty that if it is from heaven it will return."⁴⁶

He then tells the man to put himself on probation and to resolve not to move for three years. This injunction is followed by a very strange exception: the man may conform at once if he is in imminent prospect of death. Apart from that exception, he should endeavor to put the thought of Rome out of his head as effectively as he can, and give himself directly to spiritual duties. If, at the end of six months, the thoughts still return, the process is to be repeated, and so for three years. "I cannot understand how one can have any fear lest it be resisting grace."⁴⁷

Such advice is but a repetition of Newman's own method of proceeding. He had already admitted as much in a letter to Faber:

Ought not, moreover, a certain period of probation be given oneself, before so awful a change as I am alluding to? e.g., I have sometimes thought that, were I tempted to go to Rome, I should for three years pray, and get my friends to pray, that I might rather die than go, if going were wrong.⁴⁸

To have a correct picture of the confusion in Newman's soul at this time, the preceding letter must be contrasted with a confession he makes to Manning only a few weeks later. Placed side by side, the two letters will show how the will of a man can still dominate even though the strongest intellectual convictions are present in the soul:

I must tell you then frankly, unless I combat arguments which to me, alas, are shadows, that it is from no disappointment, irritation, or impatience, that I have,

⁴⁶ *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*, p. 308.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁴⁸ *Correspondence*, p. 269.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-54.

whether rightly or wrongly, resigned St. Mary's—but because I think the Church of Rome the Catholic Church, and ours not part of the Catholic Church, because not in communion with Rome, and I felt I could not honestly be a teacher in it any longer.⁴⁹

In January, 1844, there is evidence that the intellect is finally beginning to exert pressure on Newman. He begins to feel that the reasons which had guided him and the principles on which he had based his actions now no longer have the persuasiveness they once had. He reaches the position where he has to say very pathetically: "Whatever is truth and whatever is not, I do not feel called to do anything but go on where I am."⁵⁰ The old desire to resist the appeal to Rome still holds him; he still would like to consider it a duty to resist; but, now, "I cannot feel the question of duty as strongly as it is sometimes put."⁵¹ He now begins to think that perhaps he had overworked the principle taken from St. Theresa about resisting impressions: "How could a Jew, formerly or now, ever become a Christian, if he must at all hazards resist convictions and for ever? How could a Nestorian or Monophysite join the Catholic Church but by a similar undutifulness?"⁵²

The pros and cons of this constant debate made Newman act like a weary man, weary of argument. No wonder he began to look for a norm of action other than his own private judgment. No wonder he looked for the movement of the group to determine his own attitude. But this also was a subterfuge. During all this period he had certainly given no encouragement to his reason and the dictates of his reason, but it finally began to dawn on him that this anomaly could not last forever. In March, 1844, he writes to Hope:

If a person is convinced in his reason that her [the Anglican Church's] claims to Catholicity are untenable, but fears to trust his reason, such events, when they come upon him again and again, seem to do just what is wanting, corroborate his reason experimentally. They force upon his imagination and familiarise his moral perception with the conclusions of his intellect. Propositions become facts.⁵³

On June 8, 1844, he writes a momentous letter to Keble, in which there is a decided change in his attitude toward friends who had felt

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁵¹ *Loc. cit.*

⁵² *Loc. cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

the appeal of Rome. He tells Keble of his habitual conviction that is "growing more urgent and imperative continually, that the Roman Communion is the only true Church"; he speaks of how he had tried to resist that impression and of how he wrote against it; and he adds: "I am not aware in what respect I have indulged it. I have attempted to live a stricter life. . . . And I have made great efforts to keep others from moving in the direction of Rome also."⁵⁴ Then, for the first time, he feels compunction for the fact that his efforts may have caused souls to die outside the Catholic Church when they really had a call to belong to it.

Strangely enough, this is the only evidence in his letters that such a thought had dawned on him. Yet, even here, he mentions it only to pass on to thoughts of the struggle within his own soul which is attracting all his attention. Now that struggle is almost at the end. "Surely time enough has been allowed for wavering and preparation—I have fought against these feelings in myself and others long enough. . . . The time for argument has passed."⁵⁵

Having said so much, he has by no means settled the problem of his soul. The will has one more weapon that will keep him unsettled and in turmoil:

Am I in a delusion, given over to believe a lie? Am I deceiving myself and thinking myself convinced when I am not? Does any subtle feeling or temptation, which I cannot detect, govern me and bias my judgment? But is it possible that Divine Mercy should not wish me, if so, to discover and escape it? Has He led me thus far to destroy me in the wilderness?⁵⁶

That summer must have been a time of great interior trial for him. He tells Badeley in September: "I have acted like persons who pinch themselves to be sure that they are not asleep or dreaming. That I had only one view was certain, but then, was it a delusion?"⁵⁷ He still does not think that his original plan of repelling the conviction was wrong; but now he adds: "Nor does it seem to be wrong after many years of patient waiting, to begin to listen to it."⁵⁸

A short time later, to a friend who tried to explain away the attraction of Rome, Newman gives a rather accurate outline of the policy he had been following through the years. It is also the perfect answer to the explanation of the correspondent.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁵⁸ *Loc. cit.*

We are naturally friends, for we are children of this dying or dead system in which we have lived all our days. We cannot, we will not, believe what the real state of the case is. We cannot be persuaded to open our eyes. Every ominous fact admits of an explanation, and we take refuge in it.⁶⁹

That could be taken as a fairly accurate description of the state of Newman's mind during the preceding five years. He could not, he would not, believe what the real state of the case was. Whenever an ominous fact became apparent, he sought for some possible explanation, and took refuge in it. First, England was in schism, but there was no thought of turning to Rome. In fact, since such impressions were to be rejected, he attacked Rome and did what he could to prevent others from going in that direction. But he was an honest man. And when he saw again in his reading of Arianism the same ghost that had risen to bother him before; when, at the same time, the affair of the Jerusalem Bishopric hit his imagination with the same force that the truth of Rome impressed itself on his intellect, then he had to find another explanation and take refuge in it. This time it consisted in the fact that the practices of Rome were certainly corrupt, and also that he still had an obligation to remain where he was even though in schism. When these principles and reasons lost more and more of their force, he turned to an external norm of action, the movement of the crowd. And, when even that failed, he was left with only one final refuge: Is it not at least possible that I am deceiving myself, that what I am beginning to believe may be a lie?

We have mentioned how little he had studied Catholic practices during this time. His knowledge of Catholic individuals is just as meager. In a letter to Coleridge he writes: "What possible reason for 'preference' can I have for the Roman Church above our own?" He then tells him how little he knows of Catholics, and adds: "My habits, tastes, feelings are as different as can well be conceived from theirs, as they show outwardly." His reason for thinking he should become a Catholic then follows:

No—as far as I know myself the one single overpowering feeling is that our Church is in schism—and that there is no salvation for one who is convinced of this. . . . This time three years the conviction came on me again, and now for that long time it has been clear and unbroken under all change of circumstance, peace,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 329–30.

and spirits. Through this time my own question has been: 'Is this a delusion?' And I have waited, not because my conviction was not clear, but because I doubted whether it was a duty to trust it. I am still waiting on that consideration.⁶⁰

On November 21, 1844, he tells Keble of some letters which he had received from Manning, Gladstone, and others; "but they have not operated ever so little in shaking the deep confidence I have at present that Christianity and the Roman Catholic system are convertible terms." But then he looks to the members of the Roman system and adds:

I scarcely ever was present at a Roman service even abroad. I knew no Roman Catholics. I have no sympathies towards them as an existing body. (I should observe, however, that I have certainly been touched by hearing some were praying for me.) I am setting my face absolutely towards the wilderness.⁶¹

With the prospect of setting his face towards the wilderness, he can give only a very inadequate description of his motives, but he does picture very accurately the disturbance of his soul:

You must not suppose, I am fancying that I know *why* or on *what*, on what motive, I am acting. I cannot. I do not feel love, or faith. I feel myself very unreal. I can only say negatively, what I think does *not* influence me. But I cannot analyse my mind, and, I suppose, should do no good if I tried. . . . My sole ascertainable reason for moving is a feeling of indefinite *risk* to my soul in staying. This, I seem to ascertain in the following manner. I don't think I *could* die in our communion. Then the question comes upon me, is not death the test? shall one bear to live where die one cannot? I am kept first from deference to my friends—next by the fear of some dreadful delusion being over me.⁶²

This fear of delusion was particularly strong in Newman, so strong that it seems to be the real reason that kept him from the Church for almost a year. Three days after the preceding letter, he writes to his sister: "Unless something occurs which I cannot anticipate I have no intention of any early step even now."⁶³ The reason for the delay is also given to his sister in a letter of December 22, 1844:

My motive simply is that I believe the Roman Church to be true, and I have come to this belief without assignable fault on my part. Far indeed am I from saying 'without fault' absolutely, but I say without fault that can be detected and assigned. Were I sure that it was without fault absolutely, I should not hesitate to move tomorrow.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁶³ *Letters*, II, 398, 403.

This determination to move on the next day if it were clear to him that his conviction was absolutely correct does not mean that Newman looked forward to it with any sensible joy. In fact, quite the opposite was true. He knew and loved Anglicans and England, while the Church that he found to be true was neither Anglican nor restricted in any sense to England. On December 29 he writes to Keble: "No one can have a more unfavorable view of the present state of the Roman Catholics—so much so, that any who join them would be like the Cistercians of Fountains, living under trees till their house was built."⁶⁴

With the beginning of 1845 he had started on the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. In March of that same year his sister had asked in an anxious communication: "O dear John, can you have thought long enough before deciding on a step, which, with its probable effects, must plunge so many into confusion and dismay?" In answer to that letter, he writes:

If I went by what I wished, I should complete my seven years of waiting. Surely more than this, or as much, cannot be expected of me—cannot be right in me to give at my age. . . . Is it not like death-bed repentance to put off what one feels one ought to do?

As to my convictions, I can but say what I have told you already, that I cannot at all make out *why* I should determine on moving, except as thinking I should offend God by not doing so. I cannot make out what I am *at* except on this supposition.⁶⁵

He then tells her all that is to be sacrificed in the step he is taking. He is giving up a maintenance which involved no particular duties and was adequate for his wants. He is risking a rather large income from his volumes of sermons. He is deliberately sacrificing the good name he has with many, and not only fulfilling the worst wishes of his enemies but also giving them their most coveted triumph. He is distressing those whom he loves, and unsettling all whom he has instructed. "I am going to those whom I do not know, and of whom I expect little. I am making myself an outcast, and that at my age. Oh, what can it be but stern necessity which causes this?"⁶⁶

If we place on one side of a scale the confession of this letter, and on the other the conviction that has been in his mind through the years,

⁶⁴ *Correspondence*, p. 369.

⁶⁵ *Letters*, II, 410-11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

it is not too difficult to understand why he continues to fight with the possibility that his call to Rome might be just a delusion. Even through the month of April the difficulty is still calling for an answer:

I say to myself, if I am under a delusion, what have I done, what grave sin have I committed, to bring such a judgment on me? O that it may be revealed to me, and the delusion broken. But I go on month after month, year after year, without change of feeling except in one direction; not floating up and down, but driving one way. . . . What complicated distress! I suppose it will be less when the worst is over.⁶⁷

The same distress is found in a letter written to Wilberforce on April 27, after he had read the autobiography of Blanco White, a former associate of Newman who had become a pantheist before he died.

I see Blanco White going wrong yet sincere—Arnold going wrong yet sincere. . . . They did not know the fault, and so it comes to me, How do I know that I too have not my weak points which occasion me to think as I think? How can I be sure I have not committed sins which bring this unsettled state of mind on me as a judgment? This is what is so very harassing, as you may suppose.⁶⁸

From that point until the momentous day in October when he asked for admission into the Church, Newman wrote comparatively few letters. And, in the letters written, little evidence is given of his spiritual progress. He mentions only two things of importance—the joy and contentment of a friend who had become a Catholic before him, and also his own intense efforts to complete his work on the development of Christian doctrine. He tells us in the *Apologia*: “As I advanced, my difficulties so cleared away that I ceased to speak of “the Roman Catholics,” and boldly called them Catholics. Before I got to the end, I resolved to be received, and the book remains in the state in which it was then, unfinished.”⁶⁹

One final letter, written on the day of his reception into the Church, shows the state of his mind as he approached the priest: “May I have only one-tenth part as much faith as I have intellectual conviction where the truth lies! I do not suppose any one can have had such combined reasons pouring in upon him that he is doing right.”⁷⁰

pp. 415–16.

⁶⁸ Ward, *op. cit.*, I, 81.

⁶⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 234.

⁷⁰ Oldcastle, *Catholic Life and Letters of Cardinal Newman* (London), p. 11.

CONCLUSION

Let us go back to the first statement we have quoted from the letters of Newman: "If intellect were to settle the matter, I would not be where I now am. But other things come in and distress me." From an examination of the letters it seems clear that these words give the sum and substance of the years of distress and conflict before Newman became a Catholic. The history of Newman's conversion is not a "love story," nor can it be reduced to some form of *ressentiment*. It is rather the story of the effort of the intellect to assume its proper place and function in the soul of a man—the effort to reach a position where it actually did settle the matter.

It has been said very accurately that, although supernatural grace is not absolutely necessary before a man gives a natural assent to what the faith teaches, nevertheless men will not give even a natural assent in many instances unless God gives a special illumination for the intellect and a special attraction and allurements for the will.⁷¹ The reason for this is not that there is something in the motives of credibility that is too sublime for the intellect to grasp; there is nothing hidden away in them that the intellect cannot see. The motives of credibility for the Catholic Church are very much on the same plane as the proofs of revelation mentioned in the Vatican Council which are "omnium intelligentiae accommodata."⁷² If they are not accepted when presented, the difficulty comes, not from the truth, but from all that seems to be implied in accepting the truth.

We must, it is true, make a distinction between conviction and conversion. But, in Newman's mind, the acceptance of the intellectual conviction was tantamount to taking steps that would ultimately lead to conversion. For him those steps meant a severe change in his way of life, the estrangement of his friends, the misunderstanding of those whom he loved, in fact, all those heartbreaking things which he mentions in the letter to his sister. Until all that is in some way counterbalanced, it is practically morally impossible for him to accept the dictates of his reason.⁷³

Molina tells us that in many instances the conviction of the truth of

⁷¹ Molina, *Concordia Liberi Arbitrii*, q. 14, a. 13, disp. 7.

⁷² *DB*, 1790.

⁷³ L. Billot, S.J., *De Virtutibus Infusis* (Rome, 1901), pp. 76-77.

the faith will not be accepted unless God gives a special illumination of the intellect and an attraction for the will. Here we are not investigating the influence of medicinal graces in Newman's conversion. Grace is not readily susceptible of analysis. What we can investigate, however, is the working of the intellect in conceiving the truth, and the rejection of the will which found that the truth was too "hideous" to accept. For the first five years after Newman had been stunned by the phrase, "Securus judicat orbis terrarum," few things occurred in his life to make the truth less hideous. What little he saw of Catholicism offered little solace to a will that was absolutely attached to life as he then led it. During those years, reasons of every description were advanced as places of refuge from the truth that stared him in the face. But, one by one, those reasons fell before the careful, sincere scrutiny of the intellect, and they had to be abandoned, as they came, one by one. Finally, Newman had to admit that he had no reason at all for his position.

Meanwhile the intellect had forced him to stop his attacks on Rome, and also to retract the most vicious of his former charges. Next came the realization that he had no reason for attempting to keep others from Rome, and, finally, that he had no solid reason for his own personal desire to remain where he was. He still felt the duty to remain; but he could find no reason to substantiate it. Unfortunately, his meager knowledge of Catholicism and Catholics did not help to lessen the anguish or to create better dispositions. He was facing the wilderness.

Only one uneasy refuge was left him—the fear of delusion. There was nothing abnormal about that fear; it stemmed from a deep love of the religion of his youth, from which he was about to sever himself, a real love of his friends to whom he would have to say a final farewell, and a forward glance at Rome, of which he knew little and from which he expected little in the way of sensible consolation.

What was it that drove away this fear of delusion? Bremond thought a "bundle of coincidences took the place of a miracle,"⁷⁴ and gave him "that supreme sign which put an end to his last doubts."⁷⁵ These coincidences he finds in a letter which Newman wrote to his friends telling of Fr. Dominic and the strange way in which he hap-

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 310.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

pened to be in England. I am not too impressed by these coincidences. To my mind, the happiness and contentment of Lockhart, who had been converted and had entered a religious community,⁷⁶ could have been just as effective in dispelling Newman's fear.

Whatever it was, there is no doubt that Newman's religious Odyssey finally brought him to the point where the intellect actually did "settle the matter." As he said himself: "May I have only one-tenth part as much faith as I have intellectual conviction where the truth lies." In that frame of mind he entered the Catholic Church.

⁷⁶ *Correspondence*, p. 378.